

BEYOND  
THE  
WHITE  
STONE  
LIONS

LAMONT B. STEPTOE

BEYOND THE WHITE STONE LIONS

Lamont B. Steptoe

Edited by Sean Lynch

radical paper press

© 2017



American academics guard poetry with more than just white stone lions. They shield poems from the masses with barbed wire MFA degrees. They befuddle readers with obscure references and ostentatious drivel. They proclaim poetry to be worthless or dead, only to sneakily enjoy the funding of various grants dedicating millions of dollars every year to a select few. Lamont Steptoe's poetry fights against this elitist regression with profound, yet down to earth language. It is without question that the academia desires absolute power over the granting of literary recognition. An academic outsider and working-class, bi-sexual black man, Lamont Steptoe thrives despite the repression.

Rich white men ruled the western literary world for centuries. For the latter half of the twentieth century, rich white women were able to get mainstream literary credibility as well. It took only until the second decade of the twenty first century for bourgeois people of color to obtain widespread recognition in literary academia. Now many universities seek diversity for the sake of diversity in order to look like they're not racist.

Of course there were brilliant blips in the radar throughout the twentieth century. The most outstanding black poet achieving academic recognition was Gwendolyn Brooks, but she's an exception to the rule. However, even after Brooks achieved her fame and academic status, she sought to bring up her peers by developing the non-academic Black Arts Movement in the late 60's. Those peers: Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, and Etheridge Knight to name a few, were forebears for what Lamont Steptoe represents now.

Lamont Steptoe's public poetic career began in the early 1980's when he came in contact with the poetry prophets of the Black Arts Movement. James Baldwin, Samuel Allen, and Dennis Brutus would become Steptoe's literary mentors. As the coordinator for the Painted Bride Arts Center in Philadelphia and the Walt Whitman Center in Camden, Steptoe had the opportunity to meet countless famous poets, and the ability to invite legends like Gwendolyn Brooks to read for

him. The accessibility of Lamont Steptoe's language stems from these literary greats, and it's the key to what makes his poetry powerful.

When Steptoe was a child, he keenly noticed the white stone lions who would guard the library he frequented in Pittsburgh. Steptoe's avid reading and dreaming was all he had as a poor black kid in the crumbling rust belt. His growing up experience hinged on survival. It was "...Makin' due with nothin' minus nothin'..." and in order to have any intellectual development, young Steptoe needed to "...Carry dreams like switchblades..." because black culture was "...So beautiful the world has to lie / And tell us different." The aforementioned rhetoric in Steptoe's poetry never comes off as cliché, instead, his phraseology reflects the fantastical resistance and resolute willpower necessary for a brilliant black boy to withstand the daily oppression of empire and blossom into a poet. The following poems represent Steptoe's struggle, and it's my hope that reading this chapbook will ignite the creativity of other academic outsider poets.

Sean Lynch

## UNTITLED

Poets arrive  
Drunk  
Or smoked up  
Highed up on something  
You ain't never heard of  
It is my duty to be drunk  
It is my duty to be high  
It is my duty to be  
Out-fuckin'-rageous!

## FOR AMIRI BARAKA

Back in the day  
Television was black and white  
No colored folks in commercials  
No colored folks as news anchors  
There was more color in cartoons  
At the movie houses than on tv  
While we stood in bread lines  
To get powdered eggs and peanut butter  
Canned spam and powdered milk  
Back in the day we smoldered  
Like a dormant volcano  
But when the sixties came  
We exploded set cities on fire  
Water hosed bitten  
By dogs we picked up molotov cocktails  
Became snipers and revolutionaries  
Had redbooks in our pockets  
Demanded civil rights  
In the blazing nights...

SHAKESPEARE

Shakespeare  
Ain't got nothin' on me!!!  
Except  
He was free!

WHEN I AM DEAD

When  
I am dead  
Or  
Ascended  
Do not hide  
The lust I lived  
After all  
I was human  
And so was  
Langston...

## POETS

Poets are supposed to make  
People cry...  
Or sigh...  
Or die...

## FAR FLUNG GALAXIES

On the steps  
The Black boy dreams of tomorrows  
Crystal thought ships arise from his head  
Drenched in rainbows they shimmer  
Like the gossamer of a dragonfly's wings  
Illuminated like the light of fireflies  
They float upwards into the clouds  
Pulse beats of drums barely audible  
Far flung galaxies call them home

## BULLETS AND FIRE

How many times did Louis Armstrong cross the Atlantic  
All those spirits beneath the wings of his plane holding him up?  
So he could keep making his sweet truth scat and skate and simmer  
Bloom forever in a global garden making sure that other po' Black boys  
Born with music in their blood could arise from the mud  
Roll up Park Avenue in shiny limos to celebrate solid gold and platinum  
Records inspired by this sonic shaman from Catfish row  
Who loved his people don't 'cha know  
His music was sugarcane and white folks made him rich  
But there is bullets in his music and fire too!

## THE PARENTS OF GLORY

We are ruled by madness  
That of the oppressor and that that consumes us internally  
Ancient gods rattle the cages of our souls  
Infuriated at our state  
We have not been sane for centuries  
Thus we know the labyrinths of darkness  
Moving through the intestines of a white hot god  
Who burns us to ashes in our sleep  
We have weeped ourselves dry  
Walking as desert men across savannahs of salt  
Flame is our water and dust is our bread  
We call back the sacred dead to fill the ranks of warriors  
We mold armies from the seas of our planet  
Shape the light of the sun as our grenades  
Mix bones and rain with vengeance  
Engine such creatures with blizzards of sorrow  
Suit them in whirlwinds to erase the cartoons of history  
We own all mysteries and are the parents of Glory  
We will turn time inside out  
Map memory as truth



## SPACE WAVE LOGIC

Sun Ra  
Cosmos genius of space wave logic  
Starseed of Nubian renown  
Neoned boned luminosity Black Pharaoh of Catfish Row  
Bebop mad riding the chariot of a Steinway  
"Space is the place" his mantra  
"Do you want a one way or a round trip?" his question  
Galactic outsider of the politics of freedom  
'Bama man Upsouth and jet setter  
Waving his robes and gowns like banners  
In the face of unbelievers and believers  
Polyrhythmic Moses scrambling all your beliefs  
Like pig brains and eggs  
Some kinda Dark Jesus of Germantown, Philadelphia  
With Arkestra disciples  
Pounding drums and blowing horns to wake you from sleep  
Born in the crucible of "swing" he swung  
Into the outer limits of the real made a deal  
With what he found to return and preach the truth  
To convert and subvert the square world  
Wake walk his way to the New Day  
Every performance was a launching from Earth  
Out pass the Moon

"Out" was Bible and Commandments  
To the unblessed it seemed like babble  
To the ordained it was gospel on acid  
A pudding of psychedelic mushrooms  
A jubilee and juneteenth of deep space Gnostic wisdom  
Will all the starseeds stand and be counted?  
A cosmic Ark is enroute  
Under the command of Captain Henry Dumas  
Let all the brothers say, "Amen!"  
Let all the sisters say, "Amen!"  
Hold your head a little higher!  
Put more pep in your step!  
Dust off your dreams!  
Forget about your schemes!  
A civilization of magic awaits your arrival!



## SO BEAUTIFUL THE WORLD HAS TO LIE

We live a blue history  
Turned into invisible mystery  
Makin' due with nothin' minus nothin'  
Carry dreams like switchblades  
So beautiful the world has to lie  
And tell us different  
Our faces be illuminated scripture  
Of ages past and ages yet to be  
Whoever made us baked us in fires  
That forever branded us with the desire for freedom  
We wounded dreamers deposed of empires  
Royal paupers learning magic all over again  
We read the stars and cast our bones  
To understand the Ancestors' will  
All the blues of our lives is changing with the yellow gold  
Of our thoughts  
A green future is all our tomorrows

## BONE TIME

I tell time with my bones  
Listen to the history they have lived  
Know what the weather be days in advance  
I've seen my skull without my face  
Lying in a lonesome place  
All the dreams I've ever had charging stallions  
Of lightning and woe  
Engines of beauty saddled by truth  
Racing to wonder and glory

## THE PAST AGAIN

The first day of September  
A category two hurricane batters New Orleans, again  
Shrieking winds ordering ghosts to pay attention  
To the laws of the wind  
No gumbo today down "Nawlins" way!  
No gator tails red beans and rice  
No crayfish spiced with cayenne  
Just wind and water and boarded up windows  
A year and three days since Katrina  
Remembrance as storm as ship of wind loaded with spirits  
Of the former enslaved come to walk the streets of a city  
That weighted them with chains  
Now the past again in mightier form  
Uttering a language that flashes with lightning  
Rumbles with thunder  
Who's walking here?  
Agony anguish rage and justice!  
We are washing houses with truth  
Carving time with a knife of wind  
We are sending residents out on the road to be blessed  
Our orders to stay here!  
You must migrate migrate and return to better understand  
The place you dwell!

We are washing history in a washtub on the scrub board of time!  
We are building a crystal city constructing a beacon of diamond  
All eyes will know it's blinding glare!  
Crescent City Holy Land America's Africa!  
Juju city of power and mystery  
What headlines you make, what hearts you move!  
Crucible of Alchemy wear your wounds like medals  
Gleam like gold with your history  
Keep music and song as your banners  
Celebrate yourself with feasts on every street!  
Celebrate yourself!  
Teach the world the wisdom of the wind!

## THE BLACK EXPERIENCE

Everyone died  
Leavin' a bunch of loose ends  
For the livin'  
Folks passed away slowly or suddenly  
Insurance policies not enough to spit at  
Barely bought a cheap coffin  
With a sickly funeral director  
Whose whole life was buryin'  
Black folks with no money  
Everyone died  
Leavin' nothin' but loose ends  
Jesus and Amens in dey wakes  
Everyone died from oppression  
One way or another

## CALLED OUR NAMES

Are your lips dust or air?  
Are you entombed in earth or scattered as ash  
Along the streets you roamed?  
Such things are irrelevant to you now  
As you explore your new world  
You are now the vanished—an Ancestor with knowledge  
Beyond incarnate understanding  
Are you amazed?  
I'm told you told those who loved you to "Let me go!"  
You have soared beyond our history  
Beyond nights when we burned with passion  
Beyond the nights when darkness called our names  
Taught us a language that allowed us  
To walk from galaxy to galaxy

## RAGE

Rage is a fire  
That can illuminate  
The crystal vase of the body  
Making it a beacon or lighthouse  
Turning it into a supernova of consciousness  
A blinding construction that collapses to black hole  
That moans forever and swallows creation

## ANCESTORS IN THE GIT GONE

Black folks love they fish!  
Croakers  
Sea bass  
Weakfish  
Catfish  
Salmon  
Porgies  
Bluefish  
Red snapper  
Spots  
Jumbo shrimp  
So many Ancestors in the git gone  
Who dined on loaves and fishes  
Are we eating to remember the many thousands gone  
Resting on the bottom of the sea?  
Sunlight and blue water their last memory  
The liquid sky ruled by the moon  
Moaning and moaning in the scarlet wound of history



## HEAVEN IS HERE!

Yes,  
There are living Saints!  
Not all the Saints are dead!  
They yet walk among us  
Wearing their skin like a robe  
Heaven is here!  
We are standing on galaxies  
Lie down on a bed of stars  
Look at each other  
Open the one true eye  
Let the glory it reveals  
Blind you!

## DARK NIGHTS INTO HIGH NOONS

Sing your struggle!  
Create myths and stories  
Uplift Truth like a Divine Pharaoh!  
Turn those dark nights into high noons into dawn itself!  
Let every wound be a rhythm!  
Let every march be an age!  
Make songs of your blood!  
Be that vessel golden tongued with testimonials!  
Tell what you know!  
Be more than terracotta!  
Be more than clay!

## BEANS AND BREAD

Sometimes life ain't nothin' but a can of beans  
A cup of tea  
Anything that dulls the knives of hunger  
Sharpening themselves on the whetstone of the belly  
Thank God for bread that keeps me separate from the dead!  
Thank God for beans!  
Thank God for greens!  
Thank God for neckbones rice and visions of paradise!  
Thank God for tomorrow that might bring dough  
Erase today's misery and woe!

## STAR TALK

At this quiet hour I can hear the stars discussing me  
Intergalactic phone lines buzzing  
They call me "the sleepless one"  
They call me "the hermit's lamp"  
They call me "the soldier-who-does-not-forget-the-war"  
At this quiet hour I can hear the stars  
Placing bets on minotaurs and unicorns  
And wounded poets whose only companion  
Is memory

## ELIJAH

Elijah was a dark skinned countrified boy  
Long football head who wore "clod hoppers"  
Seems like he always wore suspenders as well  
"doe eyed" and minstrel lipped  
His face floating among playmates  
One day he wasn't at school in the third grade anymore  
His appendix burst  
We wondered what street death lived on

## NINE IN ONE WEEK

They could've listened to some jazz  
They could've went to a movie  
They could've masturbated  
They could've gone to the library  
And fallen asleep and dreamed  
All the knowledge into their souls  
But they did none of these things  
Instead they begged, borrowed, or stole  
Dead presidents and went to a house  
On a street littered with refuse  
Knocked on a door that barely opened  
Gave up the presidents for a powerful antidote  
To a madhouse of nightmares  
Made it to an alley, abandoned house or apartment  
Ripped open a package like you open a bag of chips  
Poured the contents into a spoon  
Lit a match to cook a bitter sugar  
To a clear liquid took a needle filled it like a fountain pen  
Belted an arm found a vein answered their pain  
Nodded into a dream so deep it turned into a grave  
Nine in one week!

## OPEN BOOK OF WONDER

Imagine

A thousand thousand spirits

Who perished

Tumbling through blue air

Of the Atlantic ocean

Their frantic motion dance of dying and crying

Weighted with block and tackle

Imagine

Their spirits rising like ancient bubbles

Clear and transparent

Floating on the surface of waves

Like jellyfish...

Waiting..

For centuries

Waiting for centuries...

Imagine

A small po' Black child in some American city

Everything against him

'cept his Ancestors and God

An open book of wonder

Imagine

One of those clear ancient floating bubbles

Lifting off like a balloon

Encoded

With the DNA of that po' Black child

That open book of wonder

Drifting and drifting and drifting

'til it finds that American city

That little Black boy

Empties its silver calabash of seed wisdom

Into the living chalice of his head and heart

Imagine

That strange little boy

Juju'd with Ancestors

So holy

His Momma her Momma and every Ancestor

On back to the beginning had orishas

Ownin' dey lives



## BEYOND THE WHITE STONE LIONS

My favorite place to be alone as a child  
Was the public library  
Where I was befriended by two spinster librarians  
Who intuitively felt  
There might be something  
To this odd little Black boy  
Bowlegged and scruffy  
Whose eyes burned with his passion for knowledge  
There beyond the white stone lions  
That guarded the entrance  
Behind the double screened doors  
Into the marbled interior  
There is where it all began  
Under that roof flooded with light from the transom  
And skylights  
This is where I dreamed the dream of writing books  
Of becoming a believer of fantastic and impossible worlds

## PROBLEM

Multiply this anger this rage this chaos  
Multiply by a million blocks  
Ten million families  
Multiply and then cube that sum  
Then cube that sum again  
The answer  
Will be war and darkness  
War and darkness

Lamont B. Steptoe was born and raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He is the author of fourteen collections of poetry while also serving as editor for two books by the late South African poet Dennis Brutus entitled *REMEMBERING* and *leafdrift*.

Steptoe is the winner of an American Book Award and a Pew Fellowship in the Arts. He has also been awarded two Pennsylvania Council on the Arts awards.

Steptoe is a Vietnam veteran and has read his poems in France, Nicaragua, Holland, Lithuania, and India. His most recent publications include *A Long Movie of Shadows*, *Crowns & Halos*, *Oracular Rumblings & Stilt Walking*, and *Meditations In Congo Square*. Steptoe is the founder and publisher of Whirlwind Press.

"Untitled," "For Amiri Baraka," "Shakespeare," "When I Am Dead," and "Poets" originally appeared in *Outcast Poetry*.





radical paper press  
2017

0/35